Walden

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Thoreau was born into a family of humble means, his father a pencil-maker. A gifted student, he attended Harvard College, where his studies included rhetoric and philosophy. After graduation, he tried out teaching, founding a progressive school with his brother, who not long after fell ill and died. He befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson, who became his mentor, introducing him into a circle of writers and inviting him to live in his house. Thoreau wandered for the rest of his life, working in his family's pencil factory in Concord for a while, spending two years in the woods near Walden Pond, returning to Emerson's house, and moving to Minnesota in an attempt to recover from tuberculosis, from which he eventually died.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Transcendentalist movement had its roots in Unitarianism, a major Christian denomination in New England in the late eighteenth century that broke with Calvinism by abandoning the notion of inherent human depravity and placing value on the intellect as the path to spiritual wisdom. In the 1820s and 1830s, some Unitarians, beginning to see the Unitarian doctrine as too coldly rational and dry, formed Transcendentalism, which placed emphasis on the spiritual quest of the individual and his striving to be one with the divine. Transcendentalism was influenced by English and German Romanticism, including the writing of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Goethe, and is considered by some to be an American incarnation of Romanticism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Thoreau and Emerson were the chief figures of Transcendentalism, a movement that promoted individualism and a belief in man's inherent spiritual goodness and was indebted to Eastern thought, notably the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which Thoreau cites in *Walden*. Other Transcendentalist books include Emerson's *Nature*, considered to be the movement's first text; Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, in which he sets out a belief at the very heart of *Walden*; and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, in which he argues that the individual has an obligation to resist government when it goes against his conscience.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*
- **When Written:** Between 1847 and 1854
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1854
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism
- **Genre:** Memoir; Philosophical text
- **Setting:** The woods around Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts.
- **Point of View:** First person (Thoreau is the narrator)

EXTRA CREDIT

Writer's Lodge. Thoreau's original purpose in going to live in the woods was not to undergo an experiment in simple living but to concentrate on his writing—in particular his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Ellery Channing, Transcendentalist poet and friend of Thoreau, advised him, "Go out upon that, build yourself a hut, & there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no other alternative, no other hope for you."

PLOT SUMMARY

Seeking solitude and self-reliance, Thoreau says, he moved to the woods by Walden Pond, outside Concord Massachusetts, where he lived for two years, writing this book, before returning to society. In the book he sets out his beliefs about society and the nature of human existence, saying first that he believes men need not work as hard as they do, if they are willing to simplify their lives and follow their own instincts. Thoreau designs a life of "voluntary poverty" for himself, determining the absolute necessities of man's existence to be: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. Criticizing society's spiritually empty obsessions with clothing and elaborate homes, as well as with formal education, travel, and the use of animal labor, he praises the savage man, who is free from the distraction of society's institutions and lives a simple life. Thoreau builds his own small cabin, earns some money by working in his bean-field, and keeps meticulous financial records to demonstrate how little a man needs to live.

When he chooses where to live and moves into his house, he celebrates becoming a part of nature and holds the pond sacred. He went to the woods to "live deliberately," he says, citing simplicity as the path to spiritual wakefulness and taking nature as his model. Discussing his intellectual life, he venerates the written word, calling books the true wealth of nations and urging all people to learn to read well. He believes, more than just reading, that a man must be a seer and listener, constantly alert to nature, and he revels in his solitude, seeing nature as a companion that wards off melancholy. At Walden he

receives many visitors, however, as many as 30 at a time, including a Canadian woodchopper, an unsophisticated man who nevertheless impresses Thoreau.

Thoreau's daily work in the bean-field, he says, dignified his existence and connected him to the earth through the ancient art of husbandry. When he wanted some company or some gossip, he often went to the village, where he was once arrested for not paying a tax but was released the next day. Back in the woods, Thoreau describes all the ponds around his house and meets John Field, a man who is too entrenched in his way of life to try a change as Thoreau has. Thoreau discusses the balance in himself between the spiritual life and the savage life, praising self-control and abstinence from eating animal meat. He observes closely the animals of the woods, admiring them for their freedom, and becomes enthralled by a war between red and black ants that happens outside his house.

When winter begins to set in, he builds his chimney and plasters his walls and keeps track of the behavior of the animals and the ice forming on the pond, whose bottom he maps. It begins to get lonely, so for company he imagines the former inhabitants of the woods based on what he knows of them. Spring arrives, melting the ice in certain patterns and bringing with it a reminder of immortality and signs of the union between man and nature. After more than two years, Thoreau leaves Walden transformed by the experience. He urges each man to explore the uncharted territories within him, to obey only the laws of his own being, and to devote his life to the work he cares about, no matter how poor he is. With spiritual awareness and reverence for nature, he says, new life can emerge from within a person.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Henry David Thoreau – The writer and narrator of *Walden*. Thoreau moves to the woods by Walden Pond in order to experience solitude, and the book is principally a record of his thoughts and observations. A believer in the Transcendentalist idea of self-reliance, he builds his own house, grows his own food in his bean-field, and stresses the importance of individuality and living according to his ideals. He critiques society for its pretensions and excesses, like clothes and travel, urging men to simplify their lives and escape societal institutions in order to elevate their lives. As a Transcendentalist, he reveres nature and strives to live a good life according to its example, combining the hardiness of nature with his intellect. He prefers solitude, though he also takes pleasure in companionship, and he believes in the power of work, both intellectual and physical, though not too strenuous, to dignify his life and bring him closer to a higher existence.

Canadian woodchopper – A man who happens upon Thoreau's house. Thoreau spends a bit of time getting to know him, describing him as a stout, simple man who likes to hunt and eat woodchucks and other wild game of the woods, loves his work of cutting down trees and does it well, and lives alone. Thoreau says that the animal aspect of the woodchopper's nature has been developed, making him happy and strong, but the intellectual and spiritual aspect has been neglected. When Thoreau asks him some philosophical questions, his answers impress Thoreau in their unpretentiousness.

John Field – An Irishman and neighbor of Thoreau's living at Baker Farm. Once, in a rainstorm, Thoreau retreats into a hut for shelter and finds John and his family there. John complains about how hard he works, but when Thoreau tells him it is possible to work less and live a better life, John demurs, not seeing any other way to exist. Thoreau describes John as honest but unambitious.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Hermit – A recluse of the woods and Thoreau's occasional fishing partner. He is isolated from society and, like Thoreau, a critic of it, believing in the value of a simple, independent existence.

James Collins – A railroad worker whose shanty Thoreau buys and tears down in order to build his house with the timber.

Cato Ingraham – A former inhabitant of the woods near Walden Pond. A slave who was given a house and permission to live in Walden Woods by his master.

Zilpha – A former inhabitant of the woods near Walden Pond. A black woman who liked to sing and sew but whose house was burned down by English soldiers during the war of 1812.

Brister Freeman – A former inhabitant of the woods near Walden Pond. A former slave. Fenda's husband.

Fenda – A former inhabitant of the woods near Walden Pond. Brister Freeman's wife. She was large and liked to tell fortunes.

Stratten family – Former inhabitants of the woods near Walden Pond. A family whose orchards used to cover the hills.

Breed family – Former inhabitants of the woods near Walden Pond. A family whose house was burned down, Thoreau thinks, by mischievous boys. Thoreau finds their only surviving member one night sifting through the rubble of the burned house.

Wyman the potter – A former inhabitant of the woods near Walden Pond. A poor man who made earthenware and paid his taxes with chips of pots, having nothing else to give.

Hugh Quoil – A former inhabitants of the woods near Walden Pond. An Irishman who was, according to rumor, a soldier at Waterloo.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SELF-RELIANCE

Thoreau's life at Walden Pond embodies a philosophy set out most famously and directly in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance." In fact, Emerson was Thoreau's friend and fellow Transcendentalist, and Emerson owned the land by the pond where he allowed Thoreau to live and build his cabin. Self-reliance is a set of ideals according to which one must live one's life, combining abstract philosophy with practical advice. According to these ideals, one must have unfailing trust in oneself and confidence in one's faculties, choosing individuality over conformity to society. By leaving society and living in solitude, Thoreau makes the ultimate commitment to self-reliance, in order to, as he says, "follow the bent of [his] genius." He stresses the importance of living independently, as he builds his own house and lives off his own land. When he does take a job, he works as a day laborer, which he says is the best living because it does not commit him to an employer and leaves him freest to pursue his own affairs.

He believes, moreover, that a student in a university receives a lesser education listening to lectures about metalwork, for example, than if he would teach himself and attempt to forge a knife on his own. Self-reliance is based on a critical stance toward society, which Thoreau believes forces people into making compromises that trap them and make them unhappy. Thoreau writes, for example, that people spend too much money and energy on clothing, following changing taste and fashions frantically. Self-reliance, instead, places value on one's own worth and individuality: quoting others is not as important as listening to one's own thoughts, and society's restrictions matter little in the face of one's own beliefs, even if one is unpredictable and inconsistent. As Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance", "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." This commitment to *inconsistency* is a moral stance, and Thoreau takes it seriously, creating a book that is full of contradiction as he figures out the way of life that is right for him individually.

WORK

Thoreau sees work as the basis of self-reliance, a source of spiritual fulfillment, and a path to a morally good life. His central motivation in going to Walden is to figure out what kind of life he should be living (what he calls his attempt to "live deliberately"), and in large part that attempt comes down to determining what kinds of work he should be pursuing. Unlike most people, whom he believes work too hard and therefore struggle through their lives and exaggerate the importance of the work they do, Thoreau believes that work should not be difficult or excessive or distract from one's proper pursuits but instead be indistinguishable from leisure, because all parts of life should be rewarding. The contentment and self-respect that a person earns through this kind of work, he believes, can elevate him and bring him closer to nature and to himself.

The individual must discover what work is right for him, Thoreau writes. He focuses on two kinds of work: physical labor and intellectual pursuits. On one hand, he builds his own house, a modest cabin made of wood and brick. In addition, he works every morning in his bean-field, turning up the soil for the good of the plants, not strenuously but meditatively. He takes pride in earning his living by his own hands, and it is his physical labor that provides him with shelter, food, and the other necessities that make his time at Walden possible. On the other hand, he devotes himself to reading, has great reverence for literature and philosophy, and wishes more people would see themselves as perpetual students, as he sees himself. The book is peppered with quotations from Eastern philosophers, English poets, and other writers whom he believes enrich him spiritually. Thoreau seeks a lifestyle that combines these two kinds of work, each with their own type of nobility, in a mutually beneficial and complementary way.

SIMPLICITY OVER "PROGRESS"

Thoreau believes that the best life is the simplest life. He rails against the luxuries that most men find so important, believing that they complicate their lives, and he criticizes the pretensions of his society, which spends so much time and energy pursuing an artificial and overblown notion of "progress." He suggests that material advancements trick people into thinking that their lives are improving or are better than their ancestors, but in reality such value placed on material things burdens them financially, binds them to their land, makes them work for their animals rather than makes their animals work for them, and leaves them exhausted and spiritually empty.

Instead, Thoreau argues for a separation between material wealth and spiritual growth, engaging in what he calls "voluntary poverty," which is how believes the wisest people in history have lived. He seeks to discern the "necessities of life," the barest conditions under which he can thrive, and then to live that lifestyle. For food, he subsists mostly on rice and rye meal, he makes bread whose only ingredient is flour, and he advocates for vegetarianism, which lets him avoid the trouble of catching animals and the moral dubiousness of killing them. He keeps meticulous financial records and finds that he can

build his house, which he can live in forever, for as much money as a townsman rents his home for a year. For clothing, he has only the fewest and most utilitarian garments. Thoreau sees this kind of living as purifying, leaving him time to pursue his true work and leaving his mind free.

SOLITUDE AND SOCIETY

Thoreau deeply values both solitude and society and brings these two seemingly contradictory impulses together in creative, paradoxical ways. On one hand, his purpose in going to Walden, where he stayed for more than two years, is to be alone, so he can "transact some private business." The book is for the most part a record of a man's time spent in solitude, and the reflections he has in that state. He stresses the importance of an independent life, in which he relies on no one for his everyday existence, and he writes that society's changing taste is a distraction to personal development. Solitude leaves him open to commune with nature, yet he writes that he is really never alone because he always has the sweet company of the natural world. On the other hand, he entertains many guests in his cabin, sometimes one or two at a time and sometimes in groups of dozens. In addition, he lives not in the wilderness but on the edge of a pond close to the town, which he visits from time to time.

Thoreau takes pleasure in the company of others who live in the woods and describes several of these people in detail in character sketches throughout the book, though these characters never appear again in *Walden*. Thoreau believes that the community of humankind is constant and has everyone as a member. For him, solitude is, unexpectedly, a way to belong to this community. He believes that a real connection with others depends on a real connection with oneself, so if true society is possible, it stems from each person's solitude. Reading especially bears out his argument: it allows him to connect in the most profound ways with the greatest minds over time and space and to do so while remaining alone in his cabin.

NATURE

When Thoreau perceives nature, he sees an inexhaustible source of wisdom, beauty, and spiritual nourishment. He regards it with great respect and awe while also having with it an intimate familiarity and comfort. Many chapters in the book are dedicated to his fond, painstaking observations of the natural world, from the way the ice breaks up on the pond in springtime, to the habits of the rabbits and fish and geese, which he sees as cohabitating with him, to the war between two races of ants that takes place on the ground right outside his cabin.

Nature is the constant backdrop that Thoreau never fails to see, and it becomes a central figure in his life. For one, he lives off it, as it provides him with shelter, food, fuel, and it fulfills all his other physical needs. Furthermore, it is a home that is much bigger than his house or any town; he is always at home because he is always in nature. He notes that Walden Pond is only on the edge of town, only a few miles from where he grew up. In so doing emphasizes that nature and all its rewards are nearby, not only in the faraway lands that people like to fantasize about, and that travel is unnecessary as most people have yet to enjoy and get to know their own backyards. Nature, open to all and free of excess, is the model for his life and the epitome of simplicity and independence.

TRANSCENDENTALISM, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE GOOD LIFE

As a self-described Transcendentalist, Thoreau believes in the individual's power to live an everyday life charged with meaning, and he has faith in self-reliance over societal institutions, focusing instead on the goodness of humankind and the profound lessons it can learn from nature. He values individuality, conviction, and focus as cardinal virtues. Eschewing organized religion, he opts to search on his own for what living a good life means, and he tries to live it as he searches. He crafts a life with a perpetual sense of striving towards something greater, such that all of his activities take on spiritual significance. Every morning he washes himself in Walden Pond and calls his bath a "religious experience," quoting Hindu scripture and writing that the pond is part of the sacred water of the Ganges River. Nature's activities, for him, are sacred rites, and he pays them due attention, believing that the present moment is the culmination of the spiritual and is as divine as all time. Furthermore, he holds that true richness has nothing to do with material wealth but with a hunger for truth and beauty. In the end, Thoreau finds living by these principles to be an essential duty, a challenge that people have an obligation to match. *Walden* is Thoreau's attempt to wake ordinary men from their sleep and call them to live better lives, more deliberate and more fulfilled.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WALDEN POND

In *Walden*, certain facets of the physical world become symbolic because of the meaning that Thoreau attaches to them. Walden Pond, at the edge of which he lives, symbolizes the spiritual significance of nature. Every morning, Thoreau takes a bath in the pond and calls it a religious experience, reminding him of nature's endless capacity to renew life and stirring him to higher aspirations. He laments that the townspeople pump the pond's water into their

houses to do their dishes, calling the water "as sacred as the Ganges," referencing the River Ganges in Indian which was believed to be holy.

THE BEAN-FIELD

For Thoreau, the bean-field symbolizes man's capacity through work to become self-reliant. The keystone of his meticulous financial records is the money he earns from selling his beans, which vindicates him by showing that it is possible for any man to support himself easily, dignifying his life with work and depending on no one besides himself and nature. Furthermore, the work itself is pleasurable for Thoreau, who looks forward to his time amid nature planting and hoeing in his field.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* published in 1995.

Economy Quotes

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile away from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Walden,* Thoreau explains the source of the book: the "year and two months" he spent alone in the woods, self-reliant and self-sufficient. However, he also makes it clear that everything he experienced, which now finds its way into the book, was not a long-term lifestyle but rather a kind of experiment. Now, finding himself back in civilized society, Thoreau is able to reflect on what he experienced in that time alone and communicate that to other people by publishing his book.

Already, Thoreau lays out the most important aspects of his time in the wilderness. He was alone, separate from society (even if a mile isn't exactly "far"), he lived amidst nature, and obtained what he needed through the work of his own hands. For the rest of the book, Thoreau will return to each of these aspects of his time in the woods, detailing exactly what they entailed and what he learned from them. But even at the beginning, we can recognize that Thoreau isn't necessarily telling everyone to leave society or abandon civilization: the fact that he has returned himself suggests that his book will be a sort of guide, attained through extreme measures but accessible to anyone.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau meditates on the unhappiness shown by so many people, he begins to ask himself why this should be the case. In this famous quote, Thoreau suggests that there is a profound disconnect between how people assume they should act and live, and the resulting emotions they feel while aligning with these expectations. In general, Thoreau is arguing, people don't question how they should live. They assume that what others have told them and what received wisdom dictates are not to be challenged. And they assume that they have no choice in the matter: that there's no way they can choose their own way to live, rather than succumbing to eternal stasis in which their desperation never stirs them to action.

The rest of Thoreau's book will propose means of countering such desperation, whether through work, simplicity, or independence. But this passage also points to the profound, even spiritual direction of Thoreau's thought. He's not simply going into nature because it will be an interesting experience or because he wants to test himself: he is deeply invested in questions of what it means to live well, of how it might be possible to live a meaningful life.

With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Even as Thoreau entreats his readers to learn to think for themselves, as opposed to following the received wisdom handed down over generations, he himself does use the past as a guide in order to explain his own motivations for the kind of life he has chosen to live. Examples of wise people through the centuries have convinced Thoreau that material luxuries do not at all equate with spiritual advancement. Indeed, the opposite is the case: the more material comforts one has, the less likely one is to attain intellectual or spiritual wisdom.

Thoreau thus critiques an economic and social system in which progress is tied to ever greater material advancements, suggesting that this has nothing to do with wisdom or with the "good life." Of course, he is also clear that the "simple and meagre life" he experienced in his time alone must be actively chosen, not suffered out of necessity or poverty, for it to be meaningful.

> All men want, not something *to do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau begins his critique of society, he returns to humankind's basic needs of shelter, clothing, and fuel, and then he attempts to determine where people have gone awry in deforming or misunderstanding such needs beyond any recognition. For instance, he is suspicious of the obsession with clothes, when people really only need very basic clothing in order to survive. What clothing does, he argues, is to create social distinctions and thus erode the natural bonds that people share with each other.

This passage takes place in the context of Thoreau expressing suspicion about the societal norms requiring new clothes at certain times in life. Rather than donning new superficial costumes, he suggests that people should focus on changing their inner selves: on discovering and working on the person they want to be, rather than something they merely put on and take off.

> The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Near his small cabin the woods, Thoreau has planted a small bean-field, and is pleasantly surprised by how fruitful it becomes over the year of harvest. He contrasts this simple, basic farming with the Concord farmers, who – out of greed, he says, but also perhaps just out of custom – use complex methods and a number of different animals to draw greater wealth out of the soil.As a result, he says, they have set up a complicated system of farming that is so expensive that they are forced to always try to extract more value out of their land through even more extensive and complicated methods of farming. In other words, they are stuck in a vicious cycle,rather than being able to live self-sufficiently off of the land.

Once again, Thoreau makes the case that what often passes, in society, for progress and advancement is actually a hindrance to living well, and living a good life. Work is important to him, but the kind of work he promotes is individual and simple rather than extravagant or elaborate.

> While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau continues his meditation on what is really necessary for people to live, he turns to the critique of extravagant homes, a sign of "progress" that to him is really a sign of decadence and waste. Thoreau underlines his skepticism regarding the way people usually talk about

progress by drawing a distinction between improved materials and methods for building houses, and the moral weakness of the people that inhabit them – a weakness that certainly has not gone away over time.

Just as he promotes concentrating on the person wearing the clothes, rather than on the clothing itself, here he distinguishes the fancy homes from those who live in them – people who may be technically noblemen and kings, but whose moral development is undeserving of any such label. Through this rhetorically powerful argument, Thoreau calls for a greater simplicity in shelter, one that will give people the chance to think about other things that really matter, rather than on external, superficial signs of social difference.

> Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau is, here, critiquing the Cambridge College students, who are eager to learn about things that have little basis in real life, and who lack any practical knowledge while they fill their head with such "distractions." In general, he says, our society is always focused on the next invention, always able to marvel at the newest innovation and to proclaim the way of progress in every achievement. Thoreau asks whether any of these things actually does represent "progress," or rather, whether they are all childish, distracting means of drawing us away from the important questions.

In some ways, Thoreau's stance might seem anti-intellectual, focused as it is on the "practical" knowledge that he thinks most important to lead a good life. In fact, Thoreau is deeply invested in abstract knowledge, and reading will be an important part of his time at Walden Pond. What he is critiquing instead is the endless, unthinking pursuit of "progress" that fails to step back and ask what the true, human purpose of it all is – a kind of critical thinking that should, in fact, characterize a place like a university.

Where I Lived, and What I Lived For Quotes

> We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has characterized his time at Walden Pond as a retreat into solitude and from society – a potentially awkward claim, given that he's only a mile away from town, and that many people do in fact come to visit him. However, Thoreau is perfectly aware of this, and for him it doesn't represent a contradiction. Instead, he wants to suggest that one doesn't need to go far away in order to reach a "new and unprofaned" part of the universe.

Such spaces of solitude, he suggests, are actually all around us, even close to the places that we think of as humdrum normal life. Thoreau has cautioned before against romanticizing or assigning special value to foreign realms or distant places: for him, simplicity also applies to travel, such that people should concentrate on the opportunities for solitude and moral questioning that are around them, rather than searching for such things far and wide.

> The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau enjoys the "spiritual exercise" that he attains from bathing in Walden Pond, and the heightened attention that he has towards nature and towards his own life as a result, his thoughts turn to those quietly desperate people

he has referenced before, many of whom fail to embrace the wonder of daily life. Thoreau uses a metaphor of sleep and wakefulness, characterizing most people as *never* fully awake, even while they are going about their daily lives. Since to be awake is to be alive, most people, he argues, are not fully alive even for most of the time they live.

By modifying the definition of what it means to be alive, Thoreau hopes to galvanize his audience into understanding that they must learn to "awaken" themselves – that is, to become alert to everything around them. This does not necessarily mean changing the material facts of their lives. Instead, it involves changing the attitude towards or perspective on the life that one already leads.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this statement, Thoreau for the first time lays out clearly and succinctly his motivations in going to live at Walden Pond for a time. Part of these motivations are negative in nature: they involve cutting out and cutting back, removing himself from the hectic rush of society in order to have time for himself, time to think. By getting rid of the duties and obligations of daily life, of the distractions of society, Thoreau hopes to pare down his life until he can grasp what is "essential" about life in general, through a more simply way of living.

However, this process of paring down is ultimately meant to add something new: to replace the inessential with the essential, and to learn from nature what cannot be learned in society. Thoreau returns to the definition of life that he has just developed, in which life only counts as such if it is experienced alertly and in a state of wakefulness. Only by experiencing the world around him in such a way, Thoreau believes, can he hope to have really *lived*. The stakes, then, could not be higher, as it is the meaning of life itself that Thoreau goes in search of in the woods.

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau continues to describe his motivations for going out into the woods, he strongly critiques the prevailing ideas of society. Thoreau is impatient with the highly complex workings of society, which people have come to believe are absolutely necessary and, indeed, indicative of human beings' important standing in the world.In fact, we don't need most of what we think we need, Thoreau says. Indeed, we become so obsessed with the complicated details of daily life that we don't even really know what it means to live.

Only by distancing ourselves from the requirements of society, however, can it become clear that simplicity is to be embraced. It may be easy to revert to the most basic needs of daily life in the woods, but Thoreau is aware of how difficult it is in society to insist on simplicity. That is why he repeats the word here with such urgency, in an attempt to break through to the reader about the importance of this idea.

God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

While Thoreau is certainly far from being an atheist, his suspicion towards established, complicated institutions extends to the religious ones as well. For Thoreau, we don't need elaborate services or fancy churches in order to have a relationship to God. Instead, God's presence can be felt around us. However, it is difficult to sense this, he argues, when we are distracted by the petty details of everyday life, wrapped up in our social lives. By going into nature, by distancing ourselves from society, we can have a more truthful and authentic relationship with God.

Such insistence on a direct relationship with God is part of Thoreau's transcendentalism, a set of beliefs which held that divinity pervades all of nature and which emerged in the United States in the 1830s and was most powerfully

argued by Thoreau's mentor and friendRalph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau has embraced these beliefs and has used them to develop his own notion of an omnipresent God that is fully present in human time, even as He exists beyond human time.

Reading Quotes

Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Although Thoreau has been critical, earlier, about the useless knowledge often learned at school, this doesn't mean that he is against learning at all – to the contrary, he believes the knowledge contained in books to be one of society's greatest gifts. However, he believes that another problem with social life as so many people live it, is that its distractions draw people away from the crucial knowledge of literature and history, as we focus on conversations with other people and on the material possessions we covet.

Similarly, while Thoreau has critiqued most people's view of "progress," he doesn't think society hasn't progressed at all – for him, society's greatest achievements are held within the pages of books. He believes, though, that too many people mistakenly think of progress as the hectic social activity of daily life, and not as the careful, reasoned arguments to be found by reading. The fast pace of everyday life makes it difficult to have time or attention for reading: therefore, once again, removing himself into nature gave him the opportunity to wrestle with the most difficult, but also most rewarding, ideas to be found in books.

Sounds Quotes

Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Although Thoreau has spent the last section praising reading and arguing for its benefits, here he suggests that reading alone is not enough. Thoreau makes a distinction between "reading" and "seeing." The first is work, but passive work: it is the work of the student learning his or her lessons. This labor is important and necessary, but ultimately insufficient, because the student must subsequently go out and actively apply this learning. That doesn't mean applying it to a trade or something materially useful, for Thoreau: indeed, "seeing" for him is a kind of active work, a way to use what one has learned in order to better appreciate the surrounding world.

The potential problem with reading, Thoreau implies, is that it can lead us to another kind of distraction, preventing us from truly seeing and engaging the world around it. Reading thus will give us the tools to see, but then we must engage with nature itself in order to fully appreciate those tools.

I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has spent most of his time at Walden alone, without company. It occasionally crosses his mind that social companionship might also be a part of the good life, despite his embrace of solitude. However, Thoreau then decides that nature itself counts as a companion. Solitude is often considered as negative in society, which tends to consider one who is "alone" as being "lonely." Here Thoreau challenges such an assumption by broadening the idea of "society" to include the living creatures, and the pulsing nature, that is around him. The solitude of nature can even, he suggests, be a remedy for those who feel utterly alone and solitary among other people, and who are led to melancholy as a result.

Visitors Quotes

I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As is often the case in *Walden*, Thoreau modifies his previous arguments – or at least modifies the way we might interpret them – as he adds further layers to his exploration of living in the wilderness. Although he embraced solitude, this did not mean that Thoreau was entirely cut off from society. Many people, indeed, have criticized *Walden* for embracing a solitary lifestyle far from civilization, when in fact Thoreau was only a mile from town and regularly hosted visitors.

Here, however, Thoreau himself sees no contradiction between insisting on solitude and welcoming company. Instead, he suggests that even "society" should ideally abide by the rules of simplicity that he has set for himself alone. Simply drawing up chairs, and hosting people with kindness rather than preparing elaborate meals, for instance, can be a way to reconcile the demands of society with those of a simple life. By assigning a purpose to his three chairs, Thoreau implies that there is a time and a place for different kinds of social relations – and no need to abolish society entirely.

Objects of charity are not guests.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau is detailing the various visitors he had while living in the wilderness. Some of the people who came were the poor, who asked for for Thoreau's charity. However, here he openly claims that he did not help these people, and indeed that he was right not to. His explanation is that for him, visitors are guests, and this definition can't apply to those who beg.

After all his talk about living the good life, this anti-charity claim might seem shocking, even hypocritical. It does, though, make more sense as an extreme variation on Thoreau's pre-existing views about self-reliance and independence. For Thoreau, if someone is lacking something, then he should go out and find a way to obtain it himself, rather than relying on others. Relatedly, people should break their solitude and join in society as equals, rather than one party maintaining some superiority over another – a relationship that may well result from the work of charity. By emphasizing hospitality over charity, Thoreau seeks to be consistent on his philosophical beliefs (even if they may make him seem cold and unfeeling, here, to us).

The Village Quotes

I was never molested by any person but those who represented the State.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has recounted how he spent a night in jail when, as he made an excursion into town, a policeman found him and cited him for refusing to pay his taxes. In fact, Thoreau's refusal had a political basis, as part of his principled refusal of supporting the Mexican-American war and the expansion of the institution of slavery into the Southwest (he objected to both things, and felt that they were connected). Not paying his taxes also, however, is another way by which Thoreau distances himself from society and attempts to live on his own means, without the complex structures that dictate how most of us live.

Here, Thoreau portrays the State as made up of people who are far more likely to "molest," that is, bother regular people. He is skeptical that the state is more helpful or necessary than not, and instead senses a need for individuals to find a way to give their lives meaning outside social and political structures.

The Ponds Quotes

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Thoreau rapturously describes the beauty of Walden Pond, and also relates certain characteristics of some of the ponds that surrounds it. Here, Thoreau makes clear that for him, these descriptions are not simply in the service of a heightened realism or naturalism – they are directly related to human beings' search for meaning, a task to which he has devoted this book as well as his own time in the woods. By personifying the lake, Thoreau attempts to make Nature more familiar to people, more connected to people, rather than a separate facet of existence separate and different from people.

Indeed, Thoreau stresses in this passage the close, even mystical connections between nature and people. This connection takes place through a kind of mutual gaze: the beholder's eye meets the eye of the earth, that is, the lake, so that each comes to better understand the other. Here as elsewhere, Thoreau wants to stress that nature isn't something totally separate from human activity, but is instead crucial to what makes human life meaningful.

Baker Farm Quotes

❝ My Good Genius seemed to say,—Go fish and hunt far and wide day by day,—farther and wider,—and rest thee by many brooks and hearth-sides without misgiving. Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures... Grow wild according to thy nature.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has gone to visit a farmer, John Field, whom he describes as unambitious though hardworking: Field is uninterested in the solitary, distanced life that Thoreau has embraced, since he is much more a man of society. Thoreau has claimed before that he wants his time at Walden Pond to serve as a lesson to other people, but here he doesn't seem too upset by Field's lack of interest in his lifestyle. Instead, Field's apathy actually encourages Thoreau to carry on, as it seems to make clear to him the correctness of his own position.

Here as elsewhere, Thoreau espouses a transcendental belief in the omnipresence of God – the Creator is everywhere, even perhaps inside human beings, and Thoreau must constantly remind himself of this presence as he enjoys all that nature offers to him. Thoreau embraces the challenges set by nature, the labor and solitude that are necessary there: for him they are not unpleasant hurdles to be surmounted, but rather positive elements of a close relationship with nature.

Winter Animals Quotes

❝ I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has already made clear that he doesn't miss the society of other people while he's in the woods, since for him nature provides companionship enough. Here he underlines the warm, inviting side of nature, which is so easily lost on those who live in society and who think of nature as something separate and apart.

In this quote,Thoreau takes great pleasure in how comfortable this sparrow obviously feels around him, since it dares even to rest on his shoulder. He implies that, even though he is participating in work meant for human purposes, there is a kind of unspoken communion between him and the bird. And for Thoreau, it is an utter privilege to be welcomed into the bird's world in such a way. Here he stresses once again how little he cares for the empty accolades of the social world, instead striving after simple companionship with nature, which he prizes all the more for being less valued in society's eyes.

Conclusion Quotes

❝ Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought... It is easier to sail many thousand miles... than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau concludes his work, he returns to one of the motivations he set forth in writing: to serve as an example in describing all he did to try to figure out how one should live. With his journey concluded, Thoreau entreats his reader to embark on a journey of his or her own. However, he is not literally asking his reader to go out and travel the world – indeed, he has been open all along about the fact that he was hardly a mile from civilization all along himself. Instead, Thoreau uses the idea of travel as a metaphor to convince his readers to look inside themselves, to enact change within themselves – a journey just as long and arduous as any physical one.

Indeed, Thoreau acknowledges that it is more difficult to gain an understanding of oneself than to travel "many thousand miles," even if the latter is what modern technology strives after and believes to be a signal of progress and greatness.Thoreau, on the other hand, is convinced that it is through the simple life, and the careful attention to the world and oneself, through which one can fully understand him- or herself and thus better understand how to lead a good life.

> I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau has explained previously that he went into the woods in order to learn how to live. While he has assured the reader of the many lessons he learned during his time in the woods, he doesn't claim to have found the "key" to a successful lifestyle – that is, he won't try to convince his readers that what they should do, in order to live a good life, is to pick up and move into the woods by themselves.

Instead, Thoreau expresses here a respect for diversity in life experiences. No one set of principles or bullet points can tell a person how to live well: instead, each person must attempt a number of different ways, trying out a number of different lives. Having learned a great deal in the woods, Thoreau now wants to return to society to try to put some of what he's learned into practice. But he also wants to underline what he sees as an essential value of humility in the various ways people try to find a meaning in their lives.

> I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him... and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau describes leaving Walden Pond, he continues to meditate on what he learned there – importantly, as part of what he calls an "experiment," rather than a new, rigidly programmatic lifestyle. Although he has been largely critical concerning the overpowering negative influence of society on modern people, here he embraces a more optimistic viewpoint. He urges his readers to pursue their own understanding of success, their own "dreams" rather than what society tells them to do. If they do so, they will not only achieve what they want – they will also learn to think of success differently, and become more in tune with the universal laws of nature and spirituality that actually have little to do with society's laws.

Once again, in addition, Thoreau makes a case for simplifying one's life in order to drown out the hectic, tempting voices of social "progress," voices that, he suggests, make what is important seem unimportant and vice versa. In general, Thoreau is less concerned here with asking his readers to follow his example of literally moving into the woods, than with explicitly suggesting conclusions and lessons that they can draw from his experience and apply in their own lives.

> If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

As Thoreau concludes, he stresses once again the importance of following one's own dreams rather than the ideas set out by society. "March to the beat of a different drummer" is a phrase so often repeated nowadays that it has become a cliché: but we should remember the more radical context in which Thoreau originally wrote it. All throughout the book, he has cautioned against the powerful conformism of society, which makes it difficult not only for us to follow our own dreams, but also even to understand what is right and what is wrong, since society twists these values so much. The "music" of which Thoreau speaks is thus not just an individual whim, but a powerful spiritual force that people can draw upon as an alternative to the corrupted, and corrupting, moral values of society.

> Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Here Thoreau makes perhaps his most definitive statement about the values by which he wants to live – values that he has learned to embrace through his time in Walden Pond. "Money" and "fame" are, obviously, values that society holds up as important, and here as elsewhere in *Walden,* Thoreau battles against this assumption of what the good life means. But his injunction against "love" is more startling. Why might Thoreau dismiss love in favor of truth, or even see them as opposed? Perhaps because love can often complicate people's affairs, preventing the simplicity that Thoreau so embraced; perhaps, too, because love can make one reliant on another person. While we might not agree that this dependence is altogether a bad thing, it's important to understand Thoreau's position in light of his general insistence on self-reliance – and of his remarkable consistency in his views (though the fact that Thoreau remained a bachelor throughout his life might help to explain his position as well).

Instead of these values, which Thoreau considers as distracting and ultimately transient, he holds truth to be the one value worth pursuing, the one around which he wants to live. The good life, then, for Thoreau, is tied to what is true even more than it has to do with being kind to others – the true, for him, *is* the good.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ECONOMY

For two years and two months Thoreau lived alone in the woods by Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, where he wrote the bulk of the book, though now he has left the woods and returned to civilization. Many people have asked him about his daily life in the woods, and this book is in part an attempt to answer those readers. He defends writing about himself and his use of the first person against the charge of egotism by saying that he is the person that he knows best, after all, and that he aims to give "a simple and sincere account of his own life."

Thoreau removes himself from society and chooses solitude at Walden Pond. At the same time, however, he presents his book as an explanation of his solitude for the readers in society. He sees his book as a way for him to communicate his ideas to others effectively.

Most men, says Thoreau, work too much. Men who have inherited farms suffer personal and financial restrictions and spend their lives toiling on many acres when they could have survived on planting a few square feet. Such excessive work prevents them from plucking the "finer fruits" of life, like leisure and friendship. Addressing the poor, he denounces the lifestyle of worrying about one's debt and living in fear of not being able to make enough money, comparing it to slavery and advocating for "self-emancipation."

Self-reliance and the call for simplicity come together in Thoreau's criticism of how most men work. By distracting them from both the true company of men and the joys of solitude, working too hard and worrying about money leaves men exhausted and distracted and degrades their lives.

What is the chief purpose of man? Thoreau asks. Most men live in despair because they have forgotten that they have a choice in how to conduct their lives. Instead, they follow the older generations, calling them wise. But it is not enough to make choices based on received wisdom, even if those choices have been practiced through history and written about by the ancients. Human lives are as various as nature. A man must be open to change and must himself figure out what is the right way for him to live.

Thoreau sees himself as addressing the highest and most basic question of human life. If man follows received wisdom, he forsakes himself and cuts himself off from the possibility of living a good life, at one with himself and spiritually fulfilled. Even the writing of the ancients is less important than a man's own internal compass.

Human advancements throughout time have not changed "the essential laws of man's existence." Thoreau designs a primitive life for himself in order to figure out what are the barest necessities a man needs to live, the elements without which no one has been able to live. He determines these necessities to be: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. His aim is to combine the toughness of primitive life with the intellectualness of civilization.

By paring his life down to the essentials, Thoreau seeks to free himself from the excesses of society. His lifestyle is a kind of experiment conducted on himself whose aim is to discover the nature of mankind's existence in general.

The luxuries and comforts to which men are so attached only hinder mankind. Being poor in outward riches is often a sign of being rich in inward riches. Thoreau calls his way of life "voluntary poverty" and suggests it is a good vantage point from which to observe human life. He seeks to solve the problems of how to live not only theoretically, like a professor, but practically as well. His advice on how to live, he says, is not directed to those who are strong and have mastered their lives, nor to those who are happy with the current state, but to those who are discontented and overworked, and also to those who are wealthy but poor in spirit.

Thoreau takes simplicity to be a moral obligation for him, both a form of self-reliance and a way to live a good life. He wants his life to be an example to all those in society who feel their existences lack meaning, whether because of too much work or too little purpose. From his solitude he calls them to change their lives.

Before coming to the woods, Thoreau spent time as a newspaper reporter, (though the editor never published his writing), a self-appointed weatherman, and an amateur herdsman and gardener of the town, before it became clear that his fellow townsmen did not appreciate his work. He tells a parable about an Indian who gets angry at a lawyer because the lawyer refuses to buy his woven baskets, and Thoreau notes that, like the Indian, he did not realize he had to sell work that other people wanted. Instead of adapting to the town, though, he chooses to go to the woods and work as he wants, calling it "a good place for business."

Thoreau tried all kinds of ways he might belong to society, but found that being alone at Walden would be the best place for him. The parable of the Indian basket-weaver represents the ways in which belonging to society dictates the kind of work a man must do and therefore limits him. Instead, Thoreau chooses solitude and self-reliance.

Clothing, Thoreau argues, is an embarrassingly excessive concern for most people. They worry more about having new, pristine clothes than they do about having a clean conscience. Thoreau urges that choice of clothing be led not by a taste for novelty or by the whims of fashion, which people adhere to do fanatically, but by utility and simplicity. Without clothes, a man's social rank would be rightfully indistinguishable. The clothing industry does not serve people's best interests but only makes corporations rich.

Criticism of society is one of the means by which Thoreau seeks to set out his vision of a good life. A taste for new fashions, he believes, is one of society's ills because it leads people away from themselves, distracting them from their inner lives, and it leads people away from each other, emphasizing their differences and exacerbating their financial difficulties.

Shelter, he continues, began as an extension of the need for warmth fulfilled by clothing and later developed to mean also a place for comfort and affections. What is the barest kind of shelter we need? Thoreau asks. Humankind began by requiring only caves for shelter. He sees large boxes by the railroad in which the laborers lock up their tools at night and considers the virtues of living an independent and pared down life in one of them. He admires the simple architecture of the Indian wigwam. He sings the praises of economy, or carefully managing one's resources, and he finds it unacceptable that homes are so expensive and luxurious that most people can't even afford to own one or spend half their lives earning the one they live in.

Nature supplied man's first home, caves. Later, shelter began to be thought of as encompassing man's need for other people. Considering the boxes by the railroad and wigwams as possible shelters underscores Thoreau's commitment to discovering the barest possible necessities of life. He believes that simplicity can free people from the lives they think they want but that actually limit them.

What are the differences between "the civilized man" and "the savage"? Thoreau asks. The civilized man conceives of institutions into which the individual is absorbed for the good of mankind. This trade-off, Thoreau maintains, is a great sacrifice, and an unnecessary one. The civilized man is morally and spiritually distracted, while the savage lives free of the threat of poverty. As far as shelter goes, civilization has created palaces but not noblemen to live in them. While the wealthy set the taste for the mass of people to chase after, the existence of the poor, who live in shanties, has been degraded. In reality, the pursuits of the civilized man are no worthier than that of the savages, so their dwellings should not be any different.

For Thoreau, the savage is a model of self-reliance because he belongs to no institutions and does not even conceive of human relations in such a way. He leads a spiritually full existence, pursuing his true work and living free from the distractions of society, such as debt, whereas the civilized man chases after material things, places importance in reliance on other people, and neglects his personal development. Of all the men living in society, the poor have it the worst, yet it is possible for even them to improve their lives.

The best art, Thoreau asserts, is made out of man's desire to free himself from the constraints of civilization. Paradoxically, however, there is no room for art in civilized life because people are distracted by lesser pursuits and pursue false beauty. Before beauty can really be appreciated, the lives of ordinary men must be dismantled and brought to their most basic state, as the first settlers of Concord lived, making homes of holes in the ground until they were secure enough and had enough food to build houses. Society's habit of building luxurious dwellings is a symptom of spiritual deprivation.

Thoreau sees art as a kind of work borne out of a person's struggle for self-reliance. As long as others in society are distracted by material goods and live empty lives, however, they will be unable to perceive the true beauty and spiritual richness of such creations. Simplicity, then, is a path to living a spiritually rich life.

In March 1845, Thoreau recounts, he went to Walden Pond and began to cut down trees for his house, singing while he did his work and taking pleasure in the beauty of the woods and the remaining frost. One day he goes to inspect the shanty of railroad worker James Collins, which he buys and tears down for the timber. He digs his cellar. In May, with the help of some acquaintances whose characters he applauds, he raises the frame of his house. Soon he builds his fireplace and has finished his dwelling.

Building his own house is the ultimate symbol of Thoreau's self-reliance, as he works in solitude amid nature's beauty to create a simple dwelling where he can pursue a good life. At the same time, he takes pleasure in the company of others and sees a good use in James Collins's dilapidated house.

Perhaps if all men built their own houses, Thoreau suggests, the poetic faculty would be developed universally, just as all birds sing while they build their nests. Instead, only carpenters build houses. He rails against the division of labor, which creates a community of men and thereby traps them in it. He wishes for all men to experience "the pleasure of construction" and advocates for an architecture that ignores the appearance of the building; its beauty then will be true and humble and not superficial.

Thoreau takes pleasure in the building of his house, seeing no distinction between work and leisure. He sees in birds a natural model for how to work, as they take physical labor to be a source of spiritual richness. He wants men to be self-reliant so each can experience this kind of beauty. He sees simplicity as true beauty, separated from appearances.

Thoreau keeps meticulous records of all his expenses in building his house and includes a chart of them. He finds that in total he has paid less than many people pay in annual rent, including Cambridge College students, who waste so much money on their education when they could avoid that expense and learn more if they were not just to study life under a professor but "earnestly *live* it" and acquire knowledge by their own hands.

Thoreau's charts are a sign of his dedication to living economically so that he can avoid all distractions, such as formal schooling is to students, who could get a better and cheaper education if they set out to educate themselves.

Like the college system and other modern advancements, railroads and traveling in general, Thoreau believes, are a ridiculous waste of money and another symptom of an unhealthy way of life in which a person spends most of his life earning money so that he can enjoy only a small part of it. In addition, people seem to place more value on the speed of getting from one place to another than they do on the importance of what they do in either place.

Travel and other purported signs of society's "progress" are not only a practical waste of money but a spiritual problem; Thoreau adheres to the Transcendentalist idea that one must find meaning in the present moment rather than suffer through it in order to enjoy a later time.

In order to defray his expenses, Thoreau plants a bean-field of couple of acres and makes a modest gain. The next year he does even better. Comparing himself to the farmers of Concord, Thoreau believes he has done better than them financially, and all while maintaining his independence. Out of greed, farmers use the labor of animals, but it is a great folly, he says, because whereas the farmer wants the animals to work for him, he ends up working for the animals.

Planting a small amount of land with crops is the simplest way to make just enough money, Thoreau believes, as opposed to the Concord farmers, who try to make a lot of money and restrict themselves in the process. For Thoreau, nature provides everything he needs, including the chance to make his own livelihood, and to do so simply.

Men should not be judged by their architecture or material wealth, Thoreau believes, but by the richness of their abstract thought: not by the temples of the East but by the Bhagvat-Geeta. Nations obsess over making monuments to prolong their renown and satisfy their vanity, but Thoreau finds them vulgar.

The building of great monuments is an improper kind of work for man. Not only is it an offense to Thoreau's taste for simplicity, but it is also a vain pursuit that distracts from true spiritual striving.

Continuing with his record-keeping, Thoreau makes charts of all his purchases for household goods and food, detailing all that he ate and asserting that a man can eat very simply and retain his health. He adds up all his expenses, adds up all his earnings, and finds the balance to be a modest deficit, against which he has gained a house, a new way of life, and the contentment that comes along with them.

Thoreau's record-keeping is proof that his philosophy of self-reliance and simplicity, far from being merely abstract, can practically be lived, and furthermore, that it does not require one to deprive oneself. Thoreau emphasizes that he enjoys his life and lives well.

After many experiments in making bread, Thoreau finds that the best way is to use just meal and water, not even salt. Originally he used leavening but then discovered by accident that he could do without it, and he notes that Marcus Porcius Cato's ancient recipe for bread does not include it. He relishes making his own food and encourages his readers to do so.

Even in bread-making Thoreau finds an opportunity to figure it out for himself, and his recipe is the simplest possible one. He stresses individuality; he does not follow Marcus Porcius Cato's recipe but enjoys the fact that they independently discovered the same thing.

For furniture and household goods, Thoreau chooses to have only the basics, including a table, a desk, three chairs, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, and one spoon. He believes that it is a shame to have lots of belongings. Once he attended an auction of a man's effects, and he says it would have been better to have had "a *bonfire*, or purifying destruction of them," as in the Indian practice of casting off old possessions annually and burning them together in a public ritual and feast.

To have such few belongings is as much as sign of the simplicity of Thoreau's way of life as it is a sign of his solitude. Living unencumbered by material possessions is a spiritual matter, so such a bonfire would be purifying to the spirit and a cause for communal celebration.

Thoreau finds that he can meet all his expenses by working six weeks out of the year, leaving the rest of his time for study. He tried teaching and trade, even contemplated picking huckleberries, but found that day labor was the best work because it left him freest. Most of all he values his freedom and doesn't desire more money because of the sacrifice in time it would entail. Labor should not be loved for its own sake, Thoreau argues. Supporting oneself does not have to be a hardship, and all of life can be a pleasure. At the same time, it does not suffice merely to follow his example; the individual must find his own way in the world, and it is best to go alone.

Part of Thoreau's goal is to see how drastically he can prove that the amount most people work is ridiculous. He believes that work is not inherently good, though it can be a path to good if done correctly. Even in giving advice, he advocates for self-reliance in his readers, making sure they know not necessarily to follow him but to figure it out themselves.

Some townsmen have accused Thoreau of being selfish. It is true, philanthropy and charity do not agree with his constitution, he says, and he, like all men, have an obligation to follow his own "genius" and not be persuaded to do the work that belongs to other men. A man, however, should not set out consciously to do good, as in giving a poor man money; what good he does he must do without knowing it, letting the good unconsciously overflow into their conversation.

Thoreau believes that philanthropy is a flawed work, but values individuality so much that he acknowledges that if a man truly discovers philanthropy to be his calling, he should pursue it. In general, though, setting out to do good to others actually does them harm because it compromises their self-reliance.

True goodness is not mere kindness or benevolence, as most people think, but spiritual strength, which belongs likewise to men of learning and intelligence throughout history and to the Indians who, being superior to physical pain, suggested new techniques to their torturers as they were being burned at the stake.

Kindness and benevolence are tame in comparison with the genius that Thoreau has in mind when he talks about spiritual strength, which transcends the physical in search of something greater.

Philanthropy, Thoreau believes, is the selfish thing. Instead of spreading courage and personal fulfillment, it spreads despair. A man's desire to be philanthropic stems from his own fears and pains, and helping others is a way to cure himself of them. Thoreau wishes philanthropists relief from their distress and the capacity to escape that kind of life.

Philanthropy is a perfect example, Thoreau believes, of the kind of harm that men unknowingly perpetrate on each other, especially when they think they are doing good. Thoreau wants the philanthropists to take care of themselves and spare others.

Organized religion is about consoling man's fears, not nourishing his hope, Thoreau believes, and has thus failed even in simple praise of God. To cure any ill and restore mankind to a state of spiritual glory, men must be as simple as nature. He quotes the Gulistan of Persian poet Sheik Sadi, who writes that only the cypress tree is called free, because it bears no fruit and therefore, unlike other trees, which have blooming seasons and withered seasons, it is always flourishing.

Instead of organized religion, Thoreau wants each person to pursue his own spiritual path. He takes nature as a model for man's spiritual life, singling out the cypress for its ability to live unencumbered, to work only as hard as necessary, and to thrive without effort.

Thoreau closes the chapter with a poem called "The Pretensions of Poverty" by English poet Thomas Carew, which criticizes the poor who have become lazy and complacent with mediocrity and have forgotten to strive for the great virtues: bravery, prudence, magnanimity, and heroism.

Though Thoreau calls his lifestyle "voluntary poverty," the poem he quotes makes it clear that he thinks not all poverty is virtuous. All men despite circumstances must strive to live a good life.

WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR

Where should his house be located? Thoreau considers. He has talked to all the nearby farmers and imagined buying their houses and living there. He believes a place in the country to be best, far from the village. In his imagination, he lays out the plans to many houses and then decides against building them, because he says true richness is leaving things alone.

Thoreau's pleasure in considering where to live is not in the actual acquisition of material goods, to which he is averse, but in the contemplation of what a life could be like there. He seeks a place that is separate from society.

The nearest Thoreau came to possessing a house was when he intended to buy the Hollowell farm, but then the farmer's wife changed her mind and didn't want to sell. He discusses the virtues of the farm, but in the end is content not to have compromised his poverty by acquiring it, and he says he took with him the beauty of the landscape, which is the best part of the farm.

For Thoreau, being close to nature is the best part of his choice of place to live. Acquiring the material possession of a house is something he must put up with in order to live in nature.

On Independence Day, 1845, Thoreau begins living in the woods full-time, during nights as well as days. The house, not yet finished, is glorious because it is a part of nature, with the wind blowing through it and the company of birds.

Independence Day has symbolic meaning as the day Thoreau becomes self-reliant and the day that he becomes one of nature's inhabitants.

Thoreau's first impression of the pond, which is sometimes misty in the early morning, sometimes still and clear as when there is a gentle rain, is that it is like a "lower heaven," with the vista and mountains spreading out behind it.

Thoreau's close observation of nature testifies to his profound relationship with it, characterized both by awe of its spiritual greatness and intimacy with its everyday workings.

Though men are in the habit of imagining faraway lands, Thoreau finds that his new living place, so close by, has all the glories of nature and made him feel just as far away from his previous life as if he had traveled far.

Thoreau criticizes society's taste for travel because they could be experiencing the full effect of their nearby surroundings, for which he has great respect.

Morning is Thoreau's invitation to make his life simple and commune with nature. Every morning he bathes in the pond, calling it a "religious exercise." He calls morning the time that all important events, including poetry and art, occur. It is the time that "intelligences wake," as say the Vedas.

Nature is his spiritual guide, leading him in its simple natural rhythms toward his own spiritual path and his proper work.

Thoreau urges each man to awaken fully and "elevate his life by conscious endeavor." It is a man's duty to make every moment of his life meaningful. Thoreau went to the woods to "live deliberately." He has faith in simplicity as the path to spiritual wakefulness.

Transcendentalism sets out Thoreau's spiritual goals; self-reliance, and the simplicity it entails, is the method he uses to go after them.

Thoreau laughs about the absurdity of a man who wakes from a nap and asks for the news when he is not really awake to life. He rails against the post-office, saying he has never read something truly important in a letter or even in a newspaper, which contains only gossip.

Interest in the news is a sign that a man is concerned with the petty dealings of society over his own spiritual life. The post-office is just another distracting modern invention.

Men often confuse the appearance of things with reality, Thoreau believes, but with true wisdom and unhurriedness it is possible to get past "petty pleasures" and perceive matters of true worth. God is in the present moment. In order to experience spiritual truth, one must spend one's days as deliberately as nature.

Thoreau emphasizes that men, especially his readers, can change their lives and awaken to the profound possibilities of everyday life if they emulate nature.

READING

Reading, Thoreau writes, is the pursuit of truth, which is immortal, while wealth and material possessions are petty and fleeting. He believes that to read well is noble and advocates that all people should learn ancient languages and read the classics. The writer is superior to the orator, he argues, just as written language is superior to spoken language, which is common. For Thoreau, a written work of art is both universal and intimate and is the art that most closely resembles life. He believes that books are the true wealth of civilizations and that writers exert more influence on people than do kings.

By feeling the need to urge all people to read well and make the point that great written art and the spiritual wealth it can bestow are universal, Thoreau implicitly acknowledges that most people do not want to experience it, contenting themselves with spoken language and material possessions. The paradox of writing is that it represents the greatest achievement of civilizations but is known by so few.

Thoreau calls on people to strive to read well. Instead, he says, most people aim too low, ignoring the classics in favor of easy reading, which he mocks, or focusing on only one book, the Bible. In this way, their intellectual and moral faculties have deteriorated. Thoreau aspires to know better men than his Concord peers: the ancients. He believes books are the way great people "explain our miracles and reveal new ones" and that by reading well, spiritual greatness can be achieved.

Thoreau is presenting another paradox: because so few people in his culture care about matters of the intellect, his reading is a solitary pursuit, but it connects him in the most profound possible way to the writers whom he reads even if they are long dead.

Concord and places like it are culturally empty, Thoreau says, and need to be provoked to strive for greater achievements. Concord's schools for children are satisfactory, he says, but there must also be schools for adults, because education must never end. He laments that the town spends money on unnecessary luxuries but not on its citizens' mental life. He wishes for a noble village.

Thoreau sees his book as a way to awaken the townspeople to the life he believes is spiritually rich and to convince them to leave behind concerns that demean their lives.

SOUNDS

Thoreau believes that man must be not only a reader, but also a seer and a listener, constantly alert and open to nature. He spends much of his time at Walden not reading or working in his field but sitting and enjoying his surroundings, such as the berry plants and hawks and frogs. His lifestyle frees him from worries about laziness or time passing or what he is accomplishing. One morning he wakes early, moves all his furniture outside, and cleans his floors, admiring how little he owns.

Even as much as Thoreau values the best kinds of work, reading and modest physical labor, they are secondary in his spiritual life to admiring nature. Nature is Thoreau's constant spiritual example, inspiring him both in its utter simplicity and in its peace, which separate it from the concerns of civilized people.

Nearby to Thoreau's house, the railroad passes. He knows the men who work on it and its daily whistle is a reminder that civilization is not so far away. The sight and sound of the train is a part of his daily rhythm like the sunrise, he says. Though he laments that the railroad is part of a culture of hard work and low ambitions, he says that commerce impresses him because of its industriousness and the cheerful attitude of the workers. He says both that the sound of the train refreshes him and that he is repelled by its smoke and steam and hissing.

Thoreau's relationship to the railroad epitomizes his ambivalent relationship to civilization: on one hand, he celebrates the company of men and admires many virtues in them, while on the other hand, he criticizes their priorities and believes they toil under false assumptions and are blind to the best parts of life.

After the train passes, Thoreau is more alone than ever, he writes. He listens to the bells of the nearby towns, the lowing of cows that he experiences as great music, the clucking of birds, the melancholy hoots of owls which sound like men moaning in grief, the rolling of wagons, the bark of dogs. He celebrates that there are no domesticated sounds, not even a tea kettle, and "no path to the civilized world."

Thoreau's catalogue of sounds is evidence to his alertness to his surroundings and the pleasure he takes in the variety and simplicity of nature. Solitude makes possible his break with the civilized world, and he celebrates it.

SOLITUDE

Walking along the pond, enjoying the animals, Thoreau believes that his solitude makes him a part of nature and therefore allows him to achieve a sense of liberty. When he returns to his house, he can sometimes tell that visitors have been there in his absence. He believes his life is as solitary as if he lived on the prairies or Asia or Africa and that he has "a little world all to [him]self."

What makes solitude worthwhile to Thoreau is the freedom it affords him, being bound to no one and to no institutions, just like nature. Thoreau takes spiritual pleasure in being alone, which makes him feel that he could be anywhere.

From nature, Thoreau gets "the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society," which prevents every possible occasion for melancholy. Would anyone consider a dandelion in a pasture to be alone? he asks. He is a part of nature, and no part of nature is ever alone. Once, he says, he did wonder if the company of other people was necessary for a good life, but even then he knew that the thought would pass.

Nature supports Thoreau's isolation from others because it prevents him from ever really being alone. The company of animals, plants, and the elements is an inexhaustible source of spiritual nourishment for him.

Some of his most enjoyable hours, Thoreau writes, were the long rainstorms in which he stayed in his house thinking. Loneliness is a state of mind, he believes, which cannot necessarily be cured by being physically close to someone. Just as people can be blind to the life of nature happening around them, Thoreau believes, they can be bad companions. Moreover, even the best company becomes wearisome after a while. There is never reason to feel alone, because the whole planet is just one infinitesimally small point in space.

Thoreau is making a point to differentiate between solitude and loneliness, which one can feel even when one is in the company of other people. In fact, Thoreau argues, it is solitude, not society, which prevents *loneliness. Even in solitude, one is connected to all things.*

Thoreau believes that people are distracted by being polite and that they spend too much time around each other, which actually makes them respect each other less. Though he has had very pleasant visits from all kinds of people, he thinks people are more lonely when they are around other people than when they are alone. What prevents the student or the farmer from being alone is not people but their work, which fulfills them.

Thoreau criticizes society for the way it prevents a person from enjoying solitude, which fosters his connection to himself and therefore allows him to create real connections to others. The work he does in solitude enriches him and gives him spiritual purpose.

VISITORS

Thoreau says that he is no hermit and that he loves society. He entertained many visitors while living at Walden, as many as 25 or 30 people at a time. When his small house didn't give their ideas enough room, they simply went out to the pine woods behind the house. If he had only one visitor, he offered a modest dinner; if any more than that, he did not offer dinner, and it was no offense against hospitality, as he believes it a mistake of society to rest one's reputation on the dinners one gives. He says that when the man who became the Plymouth Colony governor visited an Indian leader, he was served a paltry dinner and had insufficient accomodations, because that is what the Indians had to offer.

Thoreau's love of solitude does not take away from his appreciation of the company of men. When he entertains guests, he finds a way to fold them into his lifestyle: he entertains them outdoors, treating nature as a part of his home; he offers a simple dinner, or if that is not possible, he gives only what he can offer, his companionship, and does not worry about damaging his reputation according to a belief in hospitality which he regards as one of society's pretensions.

Once, Thoreau spent some time with a Canadian woodchopper (he chooses not to print his name), a simple man, healthy and stout, who interested Thoreau because he was content in his quiet and solitary life of chopping trees and hunting animals. "In him the animal man chiefly was developed," Thoreau writes. "But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant." When Thoreau asks him philosophical questions, the man responds with simple, sincere answers that Thoreau appreciates, and Thoreau can't decide if he is very wise or very ignorant, writing, "there might be men of genius in the lower grades of life."

Thoreau appreciates the Canadian woodchopper in the way he appreciates the "savages," as someone who has become self-reliant, freed himself from the traps of society, and created a fulfilling life out of simplicity, work, and union with nature. In the woodchopper Thoreau sees a lack of intellectual development, but Thoreau is willing to acknowledge that even in ignorance the man may have his own sort of higher existence and, possibly, wisdom.

Among Thoreau's other visitors include those who ask for water (he points them to the pond); a man who announces he is simple-minded and whom Thoreau greatly respects because of his humility; poor guests who ask for hospitality and are turned away because "objects of charity are not guests"; runaway slaves, one of whom Thoreau points north; children; men of business; reformers; ministers; and many others.

Thoreau feels distaste toward his guests who fail to be self-reliant and fondness toward those who lack pretensions. Mostly, in his solitary life, people merely pass through.

THE BEAN-FIELD

Thoreau's daily work is hoeing his bean-field, which he says connects him to the earth He remembers that when he was four years old he saw this land where he now lives, which he now cultivates and which many peoples before him have cultivated. He doesn't use workers or machinery to work his land, so he says he is more intimate with the beans and takes pleasure in laboring with his own hands.

Thoreau's bean-field represents his connection to nature and his faith in the power of work to enrich him spiritually. This work is a way for him to support himself in a noble and fulfilling way, and he forsakes modern farming inventions in order to connect more closely with nature and with himself.

Thoreau does his work in the bean-field daily, in the early morning. The pigeons and hawks and other birds that fly overhead while he works, as well as the other animals, offer him "inexhaustible entertainment." From the town on festival days he can hear music and the sound of guns firing, which he says sound "as far away as Palestine." Meanwhile, Thoreau is at war with the weeds that threaten his beans.

He takes pleasure in his daily work amid nature, where he can be so far removed from the concerns of civilized men and live according to his own sense of originality and independence.

Thoreau harvests twelve bushels of beans from his bean-field and sets out charts of all the money he spent in growing the beans and all the money he earned from selling the beans. He gives advice about planting the beans and advocates for planting different kinds of crops and undertaking new adventures, not following what one's predecessors have done.

Bean farming doubles as a rewarding way for Thoreau to spend his time and as a way for him to make money, but not more than necessary.

Farming, which Thoreau calls "husbandry," has sacred origins and, as ancient poetry reminds us, was once considered a great art. Now, however, pursued with greed and haste by those who want only large farms and lots of crops to sell, it has been ruined, the landscape has been deformed, and the life of the farmer degraded, who "knows Nature but as a robber."

Greedy farming is a particularly heinous spiritual affront to Thoreau both because it represents society's misplaced priorities and because it demeans nature.

THE VILLAGE

Every day or two, Thoreau goes to the village to hear the gossip, which he finds refreshing, like the sound of the leaves or frogs. He describes the village as a home of certain kinds of animals, just as the woods are. Walking through the village is like running the gauntlet, he says, with people from every direction trying to talk to you and draw you into their shops, and sometimes Thoreau escapes quickly back into the woods, sometimes very late at night, when he has to find his way back blindly. Getting lost in the woods makes one appreciate "the vastness and strangeness of nature," he says.

Thoreau's way of enjoying the society of the village is to think of it as just another part of nature. He describes the gossip of the villagers not in terms of what they said, but in terms of the sounds they made, like the sounds of the leaves or frogs. When the village is overwhelming, he retreats into his natural home, familiar even as it is strange.

One afternoon, when Thoreau was in the village, he says, he was apprehended by the police and put in jail for refusing to pay a tax. He decided not to flee, but to let the state do harm to him, and he was released the next day. He describes the incident as just another one of society's institutions getting in the way of his life. In fact, he says, he was never harassed by anyone except by someone acting on behalf of the state. Never was he the target of thievery, which, he says, would disappear if all men lived as simply as he does.

Thoreau's decision to isolate himself from society is not just a philosophical choice. It's also political, signifying a distrust in all forms of institutions, which are forms of society's excesses.

THE PONDS

The features of the landscape in the woods are humble, Thoreau writes, but Walden Pond is remarkable. It is deep, pure, sometimes blue and sometimes green, not very abundant in fish besides pickerel, has an irregular shore, and is inhabited peacefully by ducks and geese and frogs and other wildlife, like White Pond, a nearby pond it resembles. Thoreau drinks from the pond, and remembers coming to the pond before he lived there to light a fire by the shore. He sometimes goes fishing on the pond with a companion but they do not talk on the boat, and experience an "unbroken harmony" between them that is better than if they had spoken.

Thoreau's extensive, closely observed descriptions of the pond show his deep reverence for it and the spiritual grandeur he believes it has as a part of nature. When he goes out fishing with his companion but they stay silent, he is able to have a kind of solitude in the company of another person just as he is able to have solitude in nature.

There are tracks around the pond that, Thoreau thinks, were made by aboriginal hunters. According to an Indian fable, a group was holding a pow-wow on a hill and were using profanity, when suddenly the hill they were on sank and became a depression and swallowed up the whole group except for one person, a woman named Walden. Thoreau describes the pond as "earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." To him, the water is "as sacred as the Ganges," yet the villagers merely pump it into town to wash their dishes.

Thoreau thinks of himself as having a kind of connection with the aboriginal hunters of the past, who respected the land and had a sense of its spiritual value. The Indian's sense of the pond as holy is made clear in the fable, in which those who curses near the pond were swallowed up. But the villagers also belittle the pond, not by cursing near it but by seeing it only as something they can use to wash their dishes, and therefore not appreciating or even noticing its sacred beauty.In contrast, Thoreau believes he can learn about himself by looking into the pond.

About a mile way from Walden Pond, there is Flint's, also called Sandy Pond, which is much larger and more shallow, less pure, and has more fish. Thoreau laments that pond's boring name and wishes that natural features were named not after the farmers who happened to live there but after the animals that live there. Nearby, Goose Pond is small, the "lesser twin of Walden" and very similar to it, but free of boats because there are no fish in it to catch. Thoreau says, "Nature has no human inhabitant that appreciates her."

Thoreau believes that nature is pure and belongs to no one and therefore should not be profaned by having a name of some unimportant farmer, or any other human. In commenting how Goose Pond has no human admirer, Thoreau reveals himself as someone who strives to be a human inhabitant that does *appreciate nature.*

BAKER FARM

Thoreau writes that there were "shrines" he visited in the woods, pine groves and other groups of trees "standing like temples." Once, he found himself standing in the end of a rainbow and compares his intense feeling of being dazzled to a feeling described by Benevuto Cellini who, after a nightmare, woke up to see a strange, alluring light over the shadow of his head.

Thoreau approaches nature with religious passion. Like Cellini's memory, his encounters with nature are to him the most intense and important kind of experience possible.

Once, while Thoreau was walking through Baker Farm, he says, it began to rain, so he went into the nearest hut, where he found John Field, an Irishman, and his family waiting out the storm. Thoreau describes John as honest and hardworking but unambitious. When Thoreau describes his simple, independent existence to John and his family and tells them that they do not have to work hard to support themselves but can escape the big expenses that trap them, they see what Thoreau describes as a difficult life to maintain and are not interested. As Thoreau leaves the hut, he says his "Good Genius" seemed to celebrate his adventures and independent spirit and urged him, "Grow wild according to thy nature."

For Thoreau, John Field is a man who belongs to society and is afraid to try out the lifestyle that would free him from the constraints that make him unhappy and trap him in a life of debt and excess. Thoreau's encounter with John leaves him feeling elated in his independence and recommitted to his lifestyle, which allows him to enjoy the finer fruits of nature.

HIGHER LAWS

Once, Thoreau says, when a woodchuck crossed his path, he had the urge to kill and eat it. He finds in himself a spiritual life and a savage life, and he loves and respects both sides. He believes, however, that eating animal food is unclean and does not really feed the soul, and that living by preying on animals is a low way for men to live. Instead, they need a more wholesome diet, limiting what one drinks to water, the only thing a wise man should drink. He advocates that boys be taught to shoot, but as sportsmen, not hunters, who will one day leave the gun and finishing pole behind to become men of intellect.

Thoreau seeks to combine a higher life of spirituality and the intellect with the hardiness of living as a part of nature, but he believes they must both exist within a person in moderation. Hunting and eating animals makes men less human and, like drinking alcohol, suppresses his higher inclinations.

What defiles a man is not food, however, but the appetite with which he consumes it, Thoreau believes; the animal inside a man wakes insofar as his higher faculties sleep. By living a pure life and controlling one's appetites, all of which are linked, one may commune with God, he believes, and keep sacred the temple that is one's own body. From work comes virtue, while from laziness comes vice and ignorance, he says.

The danger of embracing one's savage life is that it will control him, separating him from his spiritual life. Even while living in nature, the individual has the capacity to control it, and must live deliberately and strive for a meaningful existence.

BRUTE NEIGHBORS

Thoreau talks with a recluse who lives in the woods, the Hermit, about going to the pond to fish together. Then, Thoreau explains of his thoughts about animals, who, he says, "are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts." He describes the behavior of the wild mice, the robin, the partridge, a cat he once found by the shore, and the loons on the pond, who make "perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here." He admires the animals for living wild and free.

For Thoreau, animals are "beasts of burden" not as they are for the farmer, who makes them labor, but metaphorically, because they help Thoreau to work out his thoughts. Thoreau and the Hermit aspire to be like the animals, living freely in nature, though Thoreau further aspires to combine that freeness with a life of the intellect.

Thoreau notices a war between two races of ants, red on one side and black on the other. The ground by his house is covered with the combatants, and he compares them to ancient warriors for their determination and heroism. He puts a couple of them under a microscope and observes their injuries. Thoreau is excited and harrowed as if he witnesses a human battle.

Not all of what Thoreau admires in nature is peaceful, like the war between the races of ants, but all of it has a special grace and beauty akin to virtues of the greatest men. He is not being sarcastic in comparing the ants to ancient human heroes of legend.

HOUSE-WARMING

When it begins to get cold, Thoreau builds his chimney out of bricks and sand and stones and mortar, and he plasters the walls of the house to keep the wind out. He gathers some nuts and fruits more for their beauty than for food. He says that sometimes he dreams of a larger house, although in society it is the custom to invite a guest to your home, keep them at the greatest distance from you while inside, and call it hospitality. He would rather be close to his guests.

The work of preparing his house for winter is enjoyable for Thoreau and reinforces his spiritual connection with nature. Civilized man's desire to have a big house in which to entertain guests ironically keeps him from actually interacting with them.

The first ice that forms over the pond, Thoreau says, is hard, dark, and transparent, and through it he studies the bottom of the pond and the bubbles in between the ice. He marks the date it first snowed and the date the pond freezes over completely. He takes pleasure in the work of collecting firewood, one of the commodities that society values that even he cannot do without. Normally he leaves his fire burning in the house while he is gone, though once his bed linens caught fire. Luckily, he extinguished them before major damage was done. He likes to look into the fire and says you can always see a face there.

Nature is Thoreau's companion. He observes it closely and, when it drives him inside, he appreciates its rhythms, respects its power, and finds company even in the fire. Firewood, and the warmth it gives, is a necessity, so Thoreau shares his need for it with those who live in society.

FORMER INHABITANTS; AND WINTER VISITORS

When Thoreau is alone in the winter and wants company, he says, he thinks about the former inhabitants of the woods: Cato Ingraham, a slave given a house by his master; Zilpha, a black woman who spun linen and sang and whose house was burned down in the War of 1812; Brister Freeman, former slave, and his wife Fenda, who told fortunes; the Stratten family, whose orchards once covered the hills; the Breeds, whose house was set on fire by mischievous boys and whose only survivor Thoreau finds one night surveying the rubble; Wyman the potter, who had only a chip of a pot with which to pay his taxes; and Hugh Quoil, according to rumor a soldier at Waterloo.

Thoreau amuses himself in his solitude by imagining the members of a society of misfits and independent people who followed their own whims and lived simply. He never actually knew these people but imagines them based on what he knows of them. He is able to find company where a less resourceful man would find none.

In the winter, Thoreau rarely has visitors. Once, when he walks a long way in the snow, he returns home to find the smell of someone's pipe in his house and smoldering logs on the fire. At other times during the winter, he receives visits by a farmer wanting a social visit; a poet, whose company he enjoys greatly and with whom he creates a theory of life that combined mirth with sober intelligence; and a religious man, whom Thoreau deeply respects.

These visits emphasize how much of the time Thoreau was alone, yet at the same time how much he enjoyed the company of men and benefitted from their conversations. Thoreau is not a hermit; he just believes that in order to truly know others a person must first know himself.

WINTER ANIMALS

In the winter, Thoreau hears a host of animals around his house: the hooting owl, whose sad sound is very familiar to him; the geese; the foxes, who bark like forest demons; the red squirrels, to whom Thoreau throws some corn; the jays, who stole the corn; the chickadees; the partridges; the hounds, who sometimes circle his house; and the hares, one of which lives under his house. Thoreau wonders if there is a kind of civilization among animals as is there is among men.

By removing himself from society, Thoreau chooses the natural company of animals, the different species of which have their own habits and personalities. Thoreau gives them a great deal of respect by paying such close attention to their behaviors.

THE POND IN WINTER

One night, Thoreau says, he woke up with questions on his mind but was quieted by serene nature outside his window, which asks no questions and answers none either. He goes out to the pond in search of water to drink, making his way through snow and ice. As he drinks, he declares that "heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."

For Thoreau, Nature is perfectly peaceful, an expression of spiritual serenity that is proof it is greater than humankind. It is full of surprises even to him, who is constantly alert to it.

Early in the morning, fishermen come to the lake who are so wild that they are essentially a part of nature. They are not observers of nature but rather should themselves be objects of study themselves for naturalists.

Thoreau seems to want for himself a kind of existence like that of the wild fishermen, who are more a part of nature than of society.

Wondering how deep the pond is, Thoreau determines the shape of its bottom using a stone and a cord. He makes a map of the pond as well as of White Pond, and finds a pattern: the intersection of the widest and longest parts of the pond is generally the deepest part of the pond. He comments that ethics follows a similar pattern: that the aggregate of a man's daily behavior is his character.

Thoreau takes a scientific interest in the pond, giving it a level of scrutiny that others wouldn't consider. When Thoreau wonders about something, he pursues the thought. And in doing so, he comes up a with a spiritual lesson.

In the winter, many people come from town to collect ice from the pond in order to save it for summer, when they will add it to their drinks to cool down. In addition, some northern men come down to the pond to collect peat. Occasionally, one of these men fall into the water and Thoreau takes him into his house to get dry.

Thoreau observes these men as an outsider, a solitary man belonging to nature more than he belongs to other men. They are men who come not to admire the pond but to use it, and as such they do not seem to always recognize that the pond has a sort of life of its own, and that their use of it might not be entirely without consequences.

SPRING

In deciding to come to the woods, Thoreau says, one attraction he anticipated was watching spring arrive. The ice on Walden Pond is always the last of all the ponds' ice to melt, because that pond is the deepest. Thoreau provides temperature readings of the water in different parts of the different ponds to demonstrate how ice in shallow water typically breaks up more quickly than ice in deep water. An old man told Thoreau that once, while he waited in the bushes with his gun for ducks to play in a part of the pond that had melted, he heard a great rumbling sound that turned out to be the movement of the ice against the shore.

The ice on the pond fascinates Thoreau in its great power and mystery. The changes it undergoes in spring are among the most exciting and spiritually enriching events that happen to him in the two years he spends at Walden.

Thoreau likes to watch the flowing sand and clay by the railroads as the spring thaws, comparing the patterns that form to blood vessels and to leaves, which he says are nature's master pattern. Then he compares the parts of the human body to flowing mineral mater and to leaves. He feels as if he is "in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world" and he sees all of nature in these sand patterns, calling the earth "living poetry."

First Thoreau compares nature to the human body, then he compares the human body to nature. In essence, they are parts of the same whole, and by observing them, Thoreau pays respect to the great mysteries of life, which are always available in the smallest details of natural life.

Thoreau celebrates spring as a glorious influx of light and warmth, and he details the first signs of vegetation, the animals beginning to move around, and the sparrows and other birds returning to the woods. Nature calls on humankind to live blessedly in the present moment, he believes; spring can teach men forgiveness and how to treat each other well. Once, Thoreau saw a hawk in what he calls the most ethereal flight he ever witnessed, having no companion but not at all lonely. Thoreau believes that spring is proof of immortality, and that wild nature can refresh men and bring them back to life. After two years, two months, and two days, he leaves Walden.

Thoreau believes that, paradoxically, nature can be a model both for mankind's solitude—as in the hawk—and for its society—as in the seasonal changes, in which all is forgiven and brought together. Nature is the source of life and in it miracles can be witnessed.

CONCLUSION

The universe is wide and no man needs to be tied down, Thoreau believes. He advocates exploration, however, not of distant lands, but of the lands within, urging men to open pathways within them to new thoughts. It is easier, he says, to sail thousands of miles than it is to explore "the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone."

Using a natural metaphor for the mysterious and powerful life within a man, Thoreau both criticizes the civilized man's penchant for traveling and encourages men to explore solitude as a pathway to a greater spiritual life.

The French revolutionary Mirabeau took up highway robbery in order to see what it would take within him to oppose society, but, Thoreau says, this was unnecessary because any man can find himself opposing society by following higher laws. Furthermore, he continues, one must not oppose society for the sake of opposing it, but must merely obey the laws of one's own being.

Thoreau often opposes society and its follies, but he opposes it not as an empty experiment, as Mirabeau does, but because he is following his own soul and testing out how to live his deepest beliefs.

Thoreau says he left the woods because he had "several more lives to live." Within a week of living at Walden, he had tread a path from his door to the pond. He says that every man must follow his own course; if he simplifies his life, the universe will seem more simple, solitude and poverty will give him rewards, and he will live with the higher order of beings. Thoreau criticizes "common sense," which he calls "the sense of men asleep."

If Thoreau were to live at Walden forever, there is a danger, he seems to think, that even he would have become complacent with his life. Instead, he leaves for the same reason he went there: to follow his own impulses, as unpredictable as they may be.

Are modern men intellectual dwarfs compared to the ancients? Thoreau considers. Even if it is true, it is no matter, he says, because men must still live their lives. Man must step to his own drummer and not worry about comparing himself to others or to the men who preceded him, Thoreau believes.

The advice Thoreau gives to each man, to follow his own beliefs and inclinations, he also gives to all men. Self-reliance frees men from such petty concerns as comparisons with others.

Thoreau tells the parable of an artist in the city of Kouroo who strove for perfection in making a staff. Because he devoted his entire life to this one task, his singleness of purpose gave him perennial youth and he did not grow older. "As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way," he says. After ages had passed, the artist decided he was done, and had made not only one of the most beautiful creations in the world but also a whole system of living.

The artist in Kouroo rejects petty human concerns and strives for a greater existence through devotion to his work. His purity of heart and dedication to his own deepest interests makes him into a kind of higher being and he is able to produce not only great beauty but also discover his own pathway to living a good life.

However poor one's life is, Thoreau says, one must live it and take pleasure in it and not insult it. The poor live the most independent lives in all of society, he says, advocating that men cultivate poverty, dismiss their worries about new clothes and society and gossip, and stick to the life of the mind. Poverty, he says, is actually good because it prevents one from trifling with the excesses of society. A man must find and pursue work that satisfies him, and that alone will raise up his existence.

Reversing accepted societal beliefs about poverty, Thoreau believes that the poor, because they are the least tied down by material possessions, have an increased opportunity to live a higher existence. The work Thoreau believes a man must seek does not necessarily have to provide a man with much money.

Any moment can be the moment when one's new life begins, Thoreau believes. Life within a person is like a river that can one year flood higher than ever before, or like the bug that lived in a table for sixty years and seemed to be dead and then one day emerged. The bug is proof of resurrection and immortality, Thoreau says, and man must always strive to renew himself, because he can never know what new life will emerge from him.

Thoreau's purpose in writing his book is to demonstrate and wake others to the existence of the immense possibility that is inherent in all life, which anyone may become aware of at any moment.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Saviano, Andrew. "*Walden*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Sep 2013. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Saviano, Andrew. "*Walden*." LitCharts LLC, September 15, 2013. Retrieved October 18, 2019. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/walden.

To cite any of the quotes from *Walden* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. Dover Publications. 1995.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. New York: Dover Publications. 1995.